



Original Article

The norm-dependent effect of watching eyes on donation

Yuta Kawamura^{a,b,*}, Takashi Kusumi^a^a Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University, Yoshida-Honmachi, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto 606-8501, Japan^b Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, Tokyo, Japan

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ABSTRACT

Although many previous studies have shown that eye-like images promote generosity, the mechanism of this “watching eyes effect” remains unclear. One possible cause is the concern for a good reputation as a generous person, while the other is the concerns for a bad reputation as a norm violator. To elucidate which of these two concerns is the main influencer, the present study conducted a laboratory experiment that investigated whether the watching eyes effect changed depending on social norms. If the concern for a good reputation leads to the effect, prosocial behavior would be more likely in the presence of watching eyes, regardless of the social norms involved. However, if the concern for avoiding a bad reputation as a norm violator leads to the effect, watching eyes promote prosocial behavior only in the existence of prosocial norms. In the original study, participants were asked to make a charitable donation under conditions in which eye-like images either were or were not present. In addition to the eye-like images, we manipulated prosocial norms by informing each participant of either high or low mean donation amounts given by previous participants. We found that watching eyes promoted donations only when a prosocial norm existed. This supports the idea that the watching eyes effect is caused by a concern for avoiding a bad reputation from violating norms. However, in a replication study, we were unable to replicate the original results; watching eyes did not promote generosity regardless of the norm. Taken together, we discussed the moderation effect of norms and the possibility of other moderators.

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1. Introduction

Previous studies have repeatedly examined whether individuals become generous when they are “watched” by eye-like images (e.g., Haley & Fessler, 2005; Nettle et al., 2013; Sparks & Barclay, 2013). For example, Haley and Fessler (2005) demonstrated that participants who were shown eye-like images distributed more of their money to strangers than did participants who were not shown the images. In addition, Ernest-Jones, Nettle, and Bateson (2011) found that when the experimenter put a poster of eyes in a real-world cafeteria situation, littering decreased. Such a “watching eyes effect” has been observed in both laboratory settings (Haley & Fessler, 2005; Nettle et al., 2013; Rigdon, Ishii, Watabe, & Kitayama, 2009; Sparks & Barclay, 2013) and out in the field (Bateson, Nettle, & Roberts, 2006; Ernest-Jones et al., 2011; Powell, Roberts, & Nettle, 2012).

While many studies have found the watching eyes effect, some studies did not replicate the effect (e.g., Matsugasaki, Tsukamoto, & Ohtsubo, 2015; Raihani & Bshary, 2012; Tane & Takezawa, 2011). Further, recently Northover, Pedersen, Cohen, and Andrews (2017) conducted meta-

analyses about the watching eyes effect and reported that watching eyes did not promote generosity across a wide range of situations. One plausible reason the results are mixed is that there are other factors that moderate the effect. Therefore, it is important to consider when and why the watching eyes promote generosity.

Why do eye-like images promote generosity? Concerning one possibility, researchers have argued that because pictorial eyes activate reputational concern, they promote prosocial behavior (e.g., Haley & Fessler, 2005). It is known that we are likely to choose a partner with whom to interact and cooperate, based on that individual's reputation (e.g., Sylwester & Roberts, 2013). Consequently, a person with a good reputation receives social benefits, whereas a person with a bad reputation receives negative sanctions such as punishment or ostracism. Therefore, it is important to maintain one's reputations of being a generous person. More importantly, some researchers have considered that people are so sensitive to reputation that not only real observers, but also eye-like images—in other words, subtle perception cues of “others”—can activate reputational concerns. Komiya, Oishi, and Lee (2016) conducted a cognitive experiment in which participants classified a string of letters into words or non-words as accurately and quickly as possible. The results showed that the participants reacted faster to reputational words (e.g., reputation, outcast, and rumor) in a condition consisting of eyes being presented during the task than in one in which there were no eyes present. These findings suggest that people activate

* Corresponding author at: Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University, Yoshida-Honmachi, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto 606-8501, Japan.

E-mail addresses: kawamura.yuta.83c@st.kyoto-u.ac.jp (Y. Kawamura), kusumi.takashi.7u@kyoto-u.ac.jp (T. Kusumi).

concerns about their reputations when they are being “watched” by mere pictorial representations of eyes.

Reputational concern can be divided into two components: seeking a good reputation and avoiding a bad one. Which concern is more important in inducing the watching eyes effect? On the one hand, a body of research argues that the concern for a good reputation leads to prosocial behaviors, because people with good reputations would receive social benefits, such as good interaction partners in the future (e.g., [Barclay & Willer, 2007](#)). In support of this idea, some studies have shown that the expectation of social rewards, rather than the avoidance of punishment, promoted prosocial behavior in the presence of pictorial eyes ([Oda, Niwa, Honma, & Hiraishi, 2011](#); [Powell et al., 2012](#)). Indeed, [Oda et al. \(2011\)](#) asked their participants to answer a post-task questionnaire concerning their thoughts during a money distribution task. They found that the watching eyes effect was mediated by expectations of future rewards; that is, individuals expected future rewards in the presence of watching eyes, and they were more likely than those who were not presented with eyes to behave in a prosocial manner. We refer to this explanation as the *seeking a good reputation hypothesis*.

On the other hand, people sometimes behave generously to avoid a bad reputation and the threat of future punishment (e.g., [Masclot, Noussair, Tucker, & Villeval, 2003](#)). In a situation in which generosity is normative, those who do not behave in a prosocial manner are judged as “atypical people” who violate social norms. Consequently, they get a bad reputation and become the target of negative sanctions such as punishment or ostracism (e.g., [Chudek & Henrich, 2011](#)). Some studies have argued that the concern for avoiding a bad reputation is responsible for the watching eyes effect. [Nettle et al. \(2013\)](#) showed that money distribution variance becomes smaller (i.e., there are fewer extremely high or low outlying values) in front of eyes. This suggests that participants conform to local norms to avoid a bad reputation, rather than becoming equally generous. Some additional findings fit the *avoiding a bad reputation hypothesis* (e.g., [Bateson et al., 2006](#); [Ernest-Jones et al., 2011](#); [Oda, Kato, & Hiraishi, 2015](#)). For example, [Bateson et al. \(2006\)](#) put pictorial eyes on an honesty box in an office, and found that in front of eyes people were more likely to pay for their drinks. If others saw that they did not pay for their drinks, they would be thought of as people who did not follow local rules and would be charged accordingly. Therefore, this paying for their drinks when eyes were present could be interpreted as behavior aimed at avoiding a bad reputation.

To test these two alternative hypotheses, the present study focused on social norms of generosity. In a situation in which prosocial behavior is not the social norm, not being generous is no longer non-normative; that is, a non-generous person would not be seen as a norm violator. Then, from the perspective of avoiding a bad reputation for norm violation, an individual would not behave generously, even when there are eyes watching. On the other hand, from the perspective of gaining a good reputation for prosocial behavior, acting in a prosocial manner always leads to a good reputation; thus, being watched by eyes would induce prosocial behaviors regardless of the presence of prosocial norms.

Two studies have already examined whether manipulating the norms of generosity influences the watching eyes effect ([Bateson, Callow, Holmes, Redmond Roche, & Nettle, 2013](#); [Fathi, Bateson, & Nettle, 2014](#)). For example, [Bateson et al. \(2013\)](#) investigated whether littering decreased in the presence of watching eyes, or according to the amount of litter present on the ground. If the watching eyes effect is caused by the concern for avoiding a bad reputation, eyes would inhibit littering only when the ground was clean. The results showed, however, that regardless of the litter on the ground, eyes decreased littering behavior. Thus, their results provide support for the seeking a good reputation hypothesis.

Although it is important to investigate these effects in real-world settings, many other factors, such as the level of anonymity, could have confounded with [Bateson et al.'s \(2013\)](#) manipulations. To eliminate these confounding factors, [Fathi et al. \(2014\)](#) conducted a donation

experiment manipulating norms and eyes in a laboratory setting. They brought participants to a cubicle featuring a poster with or without eyes. At the end of the experiment, they asked the participants whether they would donate something to a local organization by putting a charity collection jar on the desk. As a manipulation of a prosocial norm, they manipulated the amount of money the participants could see in the charity jar. The majority of the coins in the jar were worth 1 or 2 £ in the large-norm condition and 10 or 20 pence in the small-norm condition. Their results found a main effect of eyes, thus supporting the seeking a good reputation hypothesis.

Although these studies are well-designed experiments, we should note one common limitation: it is likely their norm manipulation was weak. Although [Bateson et al. \(2013\)](#) manipulated the norm about littering, the norm of no-littering is generally shared; it is likely that their manipulation of norm was not strong enough to override the existing norm. In relation to [Fathi et al. \(2014\)](#), the per capita donation amount could not be determined. Although the types of coins in the jar somewhat reflected whether others donated more or less, the normative behavior was unclear. Indeed, in reference to donation amount, there was no difference between the large-norm and small-norm conditions. Therefore, it is crucial to re-examine whether the watching eyes effect on generosity is dependent upon social norms by manipulating norms in such a way that participants can clearly understand what is normative.

In the present study, we examined whether the watching eyes effect depends on social norms. Unlike [Fathi et al.'s \(2014\)](#) study, we directly presented the mean amount of others' donations to clarify the social norm. Considering the fact that previous studies also presented the mean amount of others' donations as norm information ([Nook, Ong, Morelli, Mitchell, & Zaki, 2016](#); [Shang & Croson, 2009](#)), it is reasonable to use the mean amount of others' donations as norm information. By manipulating the eyes and norms, we examined the seeking good reputation and avoiding bad reputation hypotheses as both null and alternative hypotheses. We considered that if the watching eyes effect is caused by the concern for a good reputation, the watching eyes would promote donations regardless of the social norms. On the other hand, if the watching eyes effect is caused by the concern for avoiding a bad reputation, watching eyes would promote donations only in the presence of a prosocial norm.

2. Original study

2.1. Methods

2.1.1. Participants and design

One hundred thirty-nine Japanese university students aged 18–32 years ($M = 20.8$, $SD = 1.96$; 80 males and 59 females) were paid 1000 JPY to participate (120 JPY = approximately 1 USD). They were randomly allocated to one condition of a 2 (eyes: eyes vs. no eyes) \times 2 (norm: prosocial vs. non-prosocial) between-participants design: (a) prosocial norm with eyes ($n = 35$), (b) prosocial norm without eyes ($n = 35$), (c) non-prosocial norm with eyes ($n = 35$), and (d) non-prosocial norm without eyes ($n = 34$). The participant sex ratio was almost equal throughout all conditions. This study was approved by the ethics committee at the Graduate School of Education of Kyoto University, and consent was obtained from all the participants before the experiment was conducted.

2.1.2. Procedure

Under the cover story that the experiment was conducted to investigate individual differences in cognitive activity, university students participated in the experiment. Before they arrived at the laboratory, the participants completed an online survey that included demographic questions and some questionnaires. Participants answered the Praise Seeking and Rejection Avoidance Need Scales ([Kojima, Ohta, & Sugawara, 2003](#)), the Japanese version of the Social Phobia Scale

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